

A Social Interpretation of Material Culture:

The Symbolic Nature and Meanings of Things in Cultural Processes

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Abstract: In this paper I will attempt to give a social interpretation of material culture through the comprehension of the symbolic nature of artefacts and the meanings of things in cultural process. I have evidence that cultural things are objects by which people tried to affect and influence their immediate environment. Such things, which acquired a social sense through becoming a focus of human activity and included in ritual, began to play a cultural role as an important means of overcoming of social conflicts.

I am offering the following general theoretical postulates in the study of symbolic nature of things and their social expressions in cultural process: a) that every artifact is a means of transmitting vital issues of society, cultural meanings and social challenges; b) that material culture is a mode of regulating social relations, reflecting experiences of integration inside the cultural system; c) that every thing in culture is an art-mythological expression and abbreviated act, and symbolic action using a culturally recognized thing is connected with social attributes; and d) that any objects of material culture used in society are always focused on social relations and symbolic identification.

I came to the conclusion that any or all objects of material culture constitute a complicated semantic system of symbolic communication that is created within the social space. This process reflects the most important meanings of cultural transformation and social survival.

Keywords: things, material culture, meaning, transformation, symbol, survival

What is the subject of my paper?

My report explores the anthropological nature of artefacts and their humanistic mission in cultural process. The artefacts of archaeology are more than only samples of material culture and objects of scientific interpretation; they are active participants of social life. We know many examples of archaeological things being used in political, ideological and religious and inter-ethnic relations. Archaeology and anthropological reports confirm that such things often become objects over which fierce fighting and conflicts evidently occur. A crucial point arises that things have human measure and they do not exist without their creators. So every object can be considered as a concentrated expression of human life. Things are also a great resource of humanistic and aesthetic development and especially educational activities. In spite of this knowledge, very little information is available about understanding of cultural mission of artefacts, or their explicit and implicit influence on social life of people. The matter is highly relevant theoretically because things are of such profound importance

in today's cultures. The contemporary age is time of transitions. It is era of mega shift. And every transition launches a challenge against human being.

Who investigate the Meanings of Things before?

The scrutinize analysis of different manifestations of material culture and symbolic forms of things have been the subject of profound studies, for instance by Victor Turner, Garry Trompf, Luis Binford, Ian Hodder, Robert Layton, Miles Richardson, Christopher Tilley, in the English-speaking tradition. Work has been devoted to the phenomenology of things by Michel Foucault, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jean Baudrillard, Georges Didi-Huberman, Gilles Deleuze, Gaston Bachelard in the French-speaking tradition. Besides, we have large history of scholars pursuing this question in Russian science, thanks to publications by Vladimir Propp, Aleksey Losev, Yakob Golosovker, Victor Toporov, Leo Klein, Oleg Genisaretsky, I should naturally mention here the collection on 'The Meanings of Things' edited by Ian Hodder in special WAC series of the One World Archaeology, concentrated on the study of material culture and symbolic expressions through the artefacts of archaeology [1]. Among recent publications one should pay special attention to recent issue of Current Anthropology [2], where three articles address the materiality of images. The authors concerned discuss particular sets of images as physical objects.

What is the investigative Intention of this Study?

However vast the social anthropological and archaeological literature on this subject, we have some gap between archaeological and philosophical-anthropological knowledge. One cannot propose here any means of bridging this gap, but I intend to provide clarification of the anthropological nature of artefacts as active cultural phenomena, daring to hope that such an analysis of things in society might enable us to move to a deeper comprehension of cultural matters in human life.

One of the Current Trends of our changing world is the Archaeologization of Culture and Culturalization of archaeology [3].

So I try to trace the social and cultural contexts in the movement of things in the discourse of anthropological examination and phenomenological analysis. I try to show the power of archaeological objects to provide a social environment for cross-cultural reconciliation and peacemaking in educational and civil relations. Historical artefacts and monuments of material culture serve as a powerful resource for dialogue of cultures, social harmony and intercultural reconciliation.

What is the Fundamental Problem of Culture in our Time?

We live in age of the virtualization of culture and the relativization of values. At the same time we have a crisis of identity. Structural rupture is as sign of contemporary times. As the modern culture is

characterized by structural rupture/conflicts between material and spiritual, material samples of cultural heritage mainly exist separately. Objects of cultural heritage are often poorly treated during the social life of people and consequently quite often become victims of social violence, political struggles and ideological manipulation. In the meantime artefacts of culture have great force of aesthetic and humanistic influence to the life of the human being.

The basic problem in the definition of a place and the role of things in modern culture consists in amplifying separation of the objective/material world from the spiritual. During many historical times such connections had been and were supported by way of ritualizing and sacralizing cultural artefacts, but today these connectings are very unstable.

Therefore I can to put forward a Hypothesis that there is a Structural Deformation/Destruction of Contemporary Culture.

In answer, we define a special social mission of archaeology as the means of forming institutional junctions/bridge between the worlds of things and ideas. Particularity, an archaeological artefact embodies the idea of constancy in a stream of historical variability. Things move together with the people in space, and in time. But when people of one generation leaves, they leave their creations for other generations after themselves. Leaning against them the culture moves further. As N.K. Rerih put it, "the stones of past are steps to future". Every artefact of any antiquity bears in itself traces of the struggle of a life and death, the past and the present, the chaos and harmony, presence and absence. The culture is rescued from disintegration and destruction in these materialized essences – in just artefacts.

Artefacts should be Considered as Last Refuge of Culture.

The world has changed, but the artefact has remained. In history there are a lot of examples as to how the same thing/object served historically and positionally to different cultures and people. Clear samples of such 'services' are inter alia the Taj Mahal in Agra, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, and the Jerusalem antiquities.

Artefacts and Policy

The capacity of artefacts to overcome and memorialize time can often be subverted by the aggressive protest from religious and political fanatics. So the samples of material culture - memorial complexes and historical monuments have become the first victims of destruction during revolutionary transformation. Unfortunately, in our modern history - this tradition continues. For examples, we can consider the deconstruction of a bronze monument to the Soviet soldier-liberator in Tallinn, and the destruction of monuments in Iraq [4]. Artefacts can become the last victims of interethnic and interreligious conflicts. The barbarous destruction of monumental constructions of Buddha figures in

Bamiyan Valley by the Taliban in Afghanistan (2000) is a sad acknowledgement and severe caution for all of us today. Even in those cases, though, when the religious and social fanaticism has captured all the vital space of culture, artefacts can still continue to offer resistance.

Artefacts are always between Sustainability and Destruction.

In this connection archaeology has a very significant social mission in contemporary time. Artefacts always keep in itself some unchangeable essence during their moving from one culture to another one. We often find that though environments, societies and even cultures had changed, artefacts stayed. Therefore, I propose that the main social mission of artefacts is the re-structuring of the changing cultural reality.

Artefacts enable us to link the parts of even most radical shifts in space and in time. And this link has a structuring nature. In history people do not stay, death taking them, but their creations/products (ideas, symbols and things) carry on. And peoples come back in a culture/life only through these products. That is why artefacts have a grand humanistic force. Our ancestors knew it better than us. They understood artefacts as the last refuge of culture. But perhaps they sometimes knew it too well, because if they wished to destroy the culture of the enemy, they destroyed his material objects at first. So we have to create and develop a flexible infrastructure of artefacts in order to get sustainability in situation of fast cultural changes.

The more Fast of the Speed of the Transitions, the more Important the Points of Constancy, represented in Artefacts.

Artefacts keep and link the time. The force of artefacts is in opposition to destruction. Archaeology extends the points/borders of constancy in culture. And simultaneously archaeology extends the points/borders of cultural diversity.

Challenges of Time and Artefacts.

At the present time, we can see that people change things more often than people change they self-visions, or mental structures. This is real problem. The material environment by its nature is a conservative essence. Things have been traditionally created for no changes, but they are created for the keeping life in constancy. When culture is transformed, it needs counterpoints of such a keeping. The culture saves itself from destruction thanks to these 'counterpoints of keeping.' But contemporary culture has dangerous limitation on these points. Everything is too changeable and fragmentary. In ancient times, people attempted to find support against transformation or disruption by constant forms of ritual practice and sacral mythology. But in modern time we can see the complete de-sacralisation and de-ritualization of culture. Absolutely, the world has now almost nothing without shifts of time. This presents a great challenge to humanity. So it is quite pertinent to face the arresting challenge that 'just

objects of cultural and historical heritage' could become saving point for the sustainable development of the changing world.

What do the Artifacts of Peacemaking mean?

We may claim that the peacemaking has its own culture, and we should not forget about its concrete artifacts. It is these artifacts that make this particular culture socially important. These artifacts are diverse, but each of them, even the tiniest and most unnoticeable can possess a great humanistic value for the society. For behind every artifact of culture there stands a real human being, with his ideas, feelings, emotional experiences, beliefs, hopes and loves. A social mission of artifacts of culture also consists in making the world in which we are living visible and recognizable for peaceful (and peace-making) purposes. Even the bravest and brightest thought is blind, helpless and lifeless without its material incarnation. Was not Michelangelo right when claiming that we "cannot strongly love what isn't seen well"?

In conclusion I would like to remind us of an old tale. One day God decided to learn what is the most valuable thing on Earth, and he sent angels, commanding them to fetch the best of the Man's creations from

Earth. The angels immediately flew to people, to Earth, and started to search thoroughly for what they thought was the most valuable and meaningful in the human culture. They were trying to find the most desired thing for three days and three nights. However they were unable to choose just a single thing. Therefore they selected three best things in their opinion. They took a weapon, money and an ancient artefact. But while flying back to God, the weapon became rusty, the money ran out, but the artefact remained.

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